

Will There Be Enough?

Matthew 14:13-21

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost/ 2nd August 2020

Their answer was, no. The disciples said, no. More than 5,000. 5,000 men, even more women and children. Perhaps as many as 10,000—*people*. Human beings created in the image of God desperate for help and for hope, looking for healing, looking for relief, eager, hungry to be near Jesus. Do we have enough to feed all of these hungry, needy, people? The disciples said, no.

It had been a heavy couple of days for Jesus, a sad, challenging time. Jesus received word that John the Baptist had been killed—beheaded—by Herod (Mt. 14:1-12). John's disciples told Jesus and when Jesus heard the news of his death, of his friend, he had to get away. He got into a boat and tried to sail to a deserted part of the lake to be by himself. He needed to be alone. To mourn. To grieve. When the crowds heard about John's death they went searching for Jesus and found him. He eventually went ashore and saw a great crowd. When he saw the crowd—*really saw them*—when he saw the condition they were in, when he saw their suffering, his stomach turned with grief; it was a kick in the gut. It tore him up inside. That's what the text means when it says Jesus had *compassion* on them (Mt. 14:14)—he didn't have pity on them, he didn't feel sorry for them, he didn't just watch them from afar. He entered into their life. He entered into their pain. He entered into their brokenness. He entered into their suffering. He allowed himself to be touch by their suffering—which is what it means to be *human*, for Jesus shows us what it means to be fully human—and from his anguish he reached out, he acted, he healed, he did something about their condition. He used his gifts, his resources, as it were, all that was available to him and freely gave of himself and cured them.

By evening the disciples went to him and said, “This is a deserted place, Jesus, we're in the middle of nowhere. It's getting late. It's been a long day. Tomorrow is another day. Send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves” (Mt. 14:15).

Now Jesus, who I imagine was pretty tired by this point and wracked with grief and overwhelmed with human suffering, had little patience for his disciples. Perhaps they had good intentions. Perhaps they saw that Jesus needed a rest. Maybe they were just being realistic. There were a lot of people there and they would have to eat at some point, and the disciples knew they couldn't provide for all of them with what they had.

But then Jesus throws them a curve ball, saying something completely unforeseen, even ludicrous. Maybe he was irritated with them. Maybe he was tired of them always going to him to solve a problem or come up with a solution to their problems. He wanted them to act, to exercise their own agency, stop being so dependent. So he throws their advice to him back at them and suggests something unexpected and shocking: “They need not go away; ...*you* give them something to eat” (Mt. 14:16). He gives them responsibility for the crowd. He places that burden upon them.

“You give them something to eat.”

Who, us? “We have nothing but five loaves and two fish.”

“We have nothing but....”

Jesus and the disciples enter an impasse. They don't get it. They don't understand the ways of the kingdom, even after all this time with Jesus. So, he says, “Bring them here to me.” He orders the crowds to sit down on the grass. Then, “Taking the five loaves and the two fish, Jesus looked up to heaven and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and then they gave them to the crowds” (Mt. 14:19). *Then the disciples gave them to the crowds.* The disciples are commanded to give what they didn't think they had, which was not enough for everyone. But it was enough. It was more than enough. The crowds were satisfied, their hunger sated—and there were even leftovers!

I wanted to retell the story, to chart the flow of the narrative to highlight one thing in particular in this text. There are many things we can glean from this story, but today, this week, this time, for me, at least, it's the way this text reveals two different ways of viewing the world. Years ago, I was struck by an observation made by Parker Palmer, the writer and educator. He found that people generally live their lives guided by either a *myth of scarcity* or a *myth of abundance*.¹ By “myth” he means the story or the narrative that guides our lives. We have to be careful talking in generalities about people, of course, but he suggests that people tend to either live from the perspective of scarcity or abundance.

The myth of scarcity says there's isn't enough and so we live with the fear or anxiety that there might come a time when there's won't be enough for me. It assumes that in this world resources are scarce. Money is scarce. There aren't enough slices of the pie for everyone. There's not enough space. Not enough time. Not enough love. Therefore, you have to compete for your share and then you have to save it or hoard it because you never know when it's going to be taken away or run out. Whatever “it” is. You may even feel that you're not enough. That you'll never be enough. And so we make decisions, make choices from out of that myth, that story, from the perspective of scarcity, an assumption we make about the nature of things.

The myth of abundance, by contrast, believes there's more than enough in this world and so one lives with a sense of *enoughness*, which frees one to live with greater trust and hope. There's more than enough resources and food and money. The pie is huge. There's plenty of time. There's plenty of love. There's no need to compete for it or save it or hoard it. You feel satisfied because you know you're enough. You have all that you need. Then decisions and choices are made from out of that myth, from that standpoint of abundance.

This isn't a simple either-or scenario. Nothing in life is this simple. We live on a continuum between the two. In some areas of our lives things seem scarce, in other areas we know there's enough. But we all, I think we all know, that anxiety, that feeling when we are fearful that there's not enough or there won't be enough. Or maybe because we don't ever want to get to the point of feeling that way, in order to protect ourselves, we operate with the assumption that we might lose everything.

If you grew up in an impoverished household, where your family lived from paycheck to paycheck, knowing there's enough for today but not sure there will be enough tomorrow, then you know what it's like to live with scarcity and you know how scary that is. And that fear seeps into all areas of one's life, far beyond finances. For those that lived during the Great Depression of the 1930s, scarcity was, for most, real and very scary. If you were raised by parents who lived through the Depression their fear of scarcity was probably impressed upon you from an early age. I know I felt it growing up. It was everywhere.

And, today, anxieties and fears are rising, for we've yet to see the economic fallout of the pandemic upon households and our communities. We [heard](#) this past week that the U.S. economy contracted 32% in three months, the worst GDP report in our history.² And there's a real fear that evictions will soon be on the rise. Will there be enough? Will I have enough now but will I have enough tomorrow?

In the text, the disciples are anxious. They assume there isn't enough food to feed the crowd and they don't see it as their responsibility to do anything about it. But Jesus says to them—and says to the church—no, *you* have a responsibility. You have to do something. You give them something to eat. And their response? We don't have enough. Jesus knows that they do have enough, they have all that they need. He operates out of the myth of abundance because he understands how the universe works. The disciples, on the other hand, operate out of a myth of scarcity.

Which myth do you live under? Which myth do you live with? Which myth do you live by? Probably a little of both. At times I ask myself: am I operating from a myth of scarcity or a myth of abundance? Which is guiding my life? I really don't want to live with or be determined by a sense of scarcity—I know how constricting that view is. Instead, I want to trust in the abundance. And I want to trust in it, especially now. I think the church is being called to trust in it, especially in these days, for God will be looking to us to be generous in a variety of ways, saying to us, “You give them something....”

Or are we going to say, “We have nothing here but...”?

What Jesus wants them to see—what Jesus wants us to see, wants the church to see—is that there is enough food and enough resources, enough life and wholeness and healing, enough love and compassion in the world to satisfy multitudes—*providing we share it*.

Look at Jesus. What does he do? He takes what is at hand, the loaves and fish. And then he blesses them, he lifts them up to heaven, he gives thanks to God and, then, crucially, he *breaks* loaves, and then he gives. Takes. Blesses. Breaks. Give.

Sound familiar? Take. Bless. Break. Give. It's the Eucharistic pattern, the words we use at the Communion. Take. Bless. Break. Give. But this sequence, this pattern is operative beyond the Communion table. Because what happens at the table extends everywhere. All that we have. Whatever is at hand. Whatever is available. Whatever we think is ours, is given to us in abundance from God. Given to you and me. So we take whatever it at hand. And then we offer thanks to heaven, we bless it. And then, crucially—like Jesus' life, like his life on a cross, the

body is broken, the gift breaks, the bread is broken in two in order to be shared, in order to be given away, freely, in love. The breaking is crucial. The rending reveals the deep archetypal truth of the world. Here we discover there is enough. There is always enough if we share: *if we divide and share*.

And we might say we only discover there's enough when we put, like Jesus, put our hearts into it, when our compassion, as Jesus showed us, leads the way. It's amazing what can be done when we put our hearts into something, when we truly care, when we act with compassion, when we allow ourselves to be touched by human suffering and not run away from it. Our hearts, our compassion moves us to take what is at hand. And our hearts cry out with thanks. And then with compassion we break what we have, and maybe even find ourselves broken. Then in compassion we give, even out of our brokenness, we share our gifts and share ourselves—with joy—with the world, which is the goal of the kingdom.

Can you imagine the joy and fun Jesus must have had watching the disciples—disciples, not Jesus, disciples who didn't think they had enough—"We have nothing here but..."—now running all over the grassy fields waiting on the crowds? Waiting on the crowds. They're serving up bread and fish, some here, some there. "May I have some more bread, please?" someone asks. "Some more fish?" "Hey, may I have seconds?" Serving up more than they knew what to do with, feeding thousands. Making sure everyone is served. Not just a little morsel, not a snack to tie them over until breakfast. Eating, all of them, until they were all satisfied. The fish and the bread just kept coming and coming out of nowhere. Making no sense whatever. More and more it came, with no end in sight, until everyone had been fed. And the disciples were left gathering up the abundance, having witnessed God's abundance, living in and through the abundance! Abundance mediated through *them*—mediated through us if we but take, and bless, and break and give. And can't you imagine Jesus sitting back watching the holy chaos and joy of it all? Laughing and watching the disciples overwhelmed by grace, loving every minute of it, taking sheer delight and giving thanks for his disciples—in any time—who share and serve the abundance! *That's* the kingdom of God!

¹ This is a theme that runs throughout Parker Palmer's writings. I first came across it in *The Active Life: A Spirituality of Work, Creativity, and Caring* (Jossey-Bass, 1999), 121ff. See also *Let Your Life Speak: Listening to the Voice of Vocation* (Jossey-Bass, 1999).

² <https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/07/30/896714437/3-months-of-hell-u-s-economys-worst-quarter-ever>